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ABSTRACT

As sex-role equality becomes more acceptable in heterosexual relationships, it is important to examine traditional assumptions about "appropriate" masculine and feminine behaviors. Subjects (N=203) reacted to descriptions of initiations of heterosexual relationships in which the sequence of two initiations (starting a conversation and issuing a dinner invitation) and the sex of the initiator were factorially manipulated. Male initiators were perceived more positively than female initiators regardless of type of initiation, and indirect initiations were perceived as more acceptable than direct initiations for both sexes. Male subjects indicated more willingness to engage in both types of initiations than females. There were no sex differences in perceptions. The overall pattern of results suggests that some variations in the traditional assumptions about initiation of heterosexual relationships may be developing. (Author)

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PERCEPTIONS OF MALE AND FEMALE INITIATORS OF RELATIONSHIPS

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As sex-role equality becomes more acceptable and desirable as an ideal for heterosexual relationships, it is important to examine traditional assumptions about what are "appropriate" masculine and feminine behaviors. One question that has been especially susceptible to conflicting assumptions derived from traditional and sex-role equality norms is, "Who should initiate a heterosexual relationship?" The traditional assumption that the male must make the first direct move in establishing a male-female relationship strongly persists according to popular accounts ranging from Ann Landers (1979) to Jim Sanderson, the "Liberated Male" columnist (1979).

The interpersonal attraction literature on initiation is scant. In a recent review, Huston and Levinger (1978) cite evidence suggesting that people consider the attractiveness of potential partners and the probability of a favorable response before initiating social contact. This research has been conducted primarily by asking participants to choose a person from an array of potential dates or to list characteristics they seek in a date. However, to our knowledge no attention has been directed to examining how assumptions about sex roles influence and constrain initiating behavior.

An important first step in encouraging exploration of non-traditional behaviors by both sexes is understanding how these behaviors are perceived and what factors influence these perceptions. Therefore, the present study was designed to explore experimentally the perceptions of various kinds of initiations by males and females.

Pilot questionnaire research in which males and females described their own initiation attempts suggested that sex of initiator and type of initiation (direct or indirect) would be important factors influencing perceptions of initiations. We expected that direct initiations by males and indirect initiations by females would be perceived most favorably.

METHOD

Subjects. Subjects were 92 male and 111 female volunteers from general psychology classes at an urban university.

Procedure. Subjects were asked to react to written descriptions of a social situation. In the descriptions a sequence of two initiations was presented. One initiation involved starting a friendly conversation, the other inviting the target to dinner. The order of the sequence was manipulated so that half the time the conversation initiation occurred first (indirect sequence) and half the time the dinner invitation occurred first (direct sequence). The sex of both initiators in each description was factorially manipulated, resulting in a 2 (direct vs. indirect) x 2 (sex of first initiator) x 2 (sex of second initiator) x 2 (sex of respondent) design. The description read as follows for the direct initiation sequence:

> You have been working at a part-time job, and one day a (female, male) acquaintance of yours also joins the staff.
>
> One afternoon about three weeks later while you are working at your desk you notice your acquaintance go up to a (male, female) staff members and ask (him, her) to go out to dinner. (He, She) then engages (her, him) in friendly conversation about general topics. After 45 minutes you see them heading for a restaurant for dinner together.

The indirect initiation description was identical except the dinner invitation followed the initiation of conversation.

After reading the description, respondents completed a series of 7-point rating scales on the attractiveness of the individuals, the social acceptibility of their behavior, how likely it was that the first initiator relied on nonverbal cues from the other person, and the likelihood that the subject would engage in the same behaviors.

Results

A multivariate analysis of variance using the rating scales as dependent measures revealed significant main effects for type of initiation (F (7, 161) = 3.15, $p < .01$), sex of first initiator (F, (7, 161) = 8.12, $p < .01$), and sex of subject (F (7, 161) = 3.88, $p < .01$). Univariate analyses of variance were then performed on responses to each rating scale to determine which scales contributed to these effects. A main effect for type of initiation was found on the rating of social acceptability of the acquaintance's behavior (F (1, 186) = 6.02, $p < .02$), indicating that indirect initiations were perceived as more socially acceptable than direct ones regardless of the sex of the initiator. Two dependent measures contributed to the overall effect for sex of first initiator: social acceptability of the acquaintance's (first initiator's) behavior (F (1, 186) = 25.46, $p < .01$), and the rating of the initiator's reliance on nonverbal cues (F (1, 182) = 5.46, $p < .02$). These findings indicated that a male taking the initiative is seen as more socially acceptable than a female doing so, regardless of whether he starts a con-

versation or asks his target to dinner. Also, a female first initiator is assumed to have relied more on nonverbal cues from her target than a male. Contributing to the overall main effect for sex of respondent were the ratings of how likely the respondent would be to engage in the behaviors performed by the acquaintance (F (1, 183) = 15.56, $p < .01$) and the staff member (F (1, 183) = 3.73, $p < .05$). Male respondents indicated more willingness to engage in these behaviors than did female respondents.

The prediction that direct initiations by males and indirect initiations by females would be perceived most favorably was not supported. There was no significant interaction between type of initiation and sex of first initiator, nor were there any other significant interactions. Means on the ratings of the acquaintance's social acceptability are presented in Table 1.

Discussion

This study indicated that male initiators of heterosexual interactions were perceived as more acceptable than female initiators whether they initiated with a conversation or a dinner invitation. Also, indirect initiations on the part of both sexes were perceived more favorably than direct initiations.

Although these findings may suggest that perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior continue to be governed by familiar sex-role stereotypes, some of the similarities in perceptions (i.e., non-findings) might also be highlighted. For example, there were no significant differences in the appropriateness ratings of male and female staff members' behavior when they responded with a dinner invitation to the acquaintance's initiation of friendly conversation. And there were no differences in at-

tractiveness ratings of the acquaintance and the staff member among the different initiation conditions. Also, there were no sex differences in perceptions of the different types of initiations (though males did indicate more willingness to engage in all types of initiation than did females). Finally, all ratings of social acceptability of the initiations, whether by males or by females, were above the midpoint of the scale.

Although earlier comparable data are not available, the overall pattern of results suggests that some variations in the traditional assumptions about initiation of heterosexual relationships may be developing. It is clear that the type of initiation, the previous behavior of the target, and factors other than sex of the initiator are important to consider in exploring perceptions of initiations and in eventually encouraging a variety of types of initiations not constrained by assumptions about masculine or feminine roles.

TABLE 1

Mean ratings of acquaintance's (first initiator's) social acceptability by type of initiation and sex of initiator

DIRECT INITIATION
(Dinner then Conversation)

SECOND INITIATOR	FIRST INITIATOR: MALE	FIRST INITIATOR: FEMALE
MALE	5.55 (29)	4.68 (25)
FEMALE	6.04 (27)	5.04 (24)

INDIRECT INITIATION
(Conversation then Dinner)

SECOND INITIATOR	FIRST INITIATOR: MALE	FIRST INITIATOR: FEMALE
MALE	6.32 (25)	5.32 (25)
FEMALE	6.48 (23)	5.16 (25)

Notes: N per cell indicated in parentheses. Possible responses ranged from 1 (totally unacceptable) to 7 (totally acceptable).

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